WINK WINK, NUDGE NUDGE

ALBA PRATALIA

A SHORT STORY (SORT OF)

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Nathan had been sleepless so long, he was so tired and so sleepy and his body so aching and his mind so numb that, as always, he could not sleep. Too tired to sleep, too aching to pass out. His own body had unionized against him — *the eyelids had walked out, the muscles had filed a complaint, and the brain was holding a sit-in between two neurons*.

He stared at the ceiling, which had become his most faithful relationship. The stains looked like continents on a map of failure. Somewhere between Africa and despair, a mosquito hummed the national anthem of insomnia.

Nathan rolled over. That changed nothing, except the direction from which he hated the world.

Then panic set in.
Uncontrolled, sleepless, unshaven, *mens insana*

in corpore insalubre—a mind so out of tune it made tinnitus sound like Bach. Panic didn't knock. Panic didn't ask. Panic came in like the Red Army storming East Berlin: tanks of adrenaline, loudspeakers blaring "sleep is treason," parachutes of dread landing behind enemy lines (his eyelids).

His heart began doing jazz solos. His breath turned into Morse code. His limbs, traitorous, prepared for an invisible duel. He tried to remind himself: *you're safe*. But the brain said, "I don't do safe. I do theater."

Nathan ran to the kitchen and to the cure: vodka, lime, seltz. Glug glug glug. Give it time. Better insist anyway. Glug glug glug. The bottle made no promises but at least didn't lie. With a little Dutch courage, panic lost its inhibitions and started stripping down.
"Panic," Nathan whispered, "take off your coat real slow."
Panic obeyed, trembling.

“Can’t take off your shoes?”
“I’ll take off your shoes.”
“Take off your dress—yes, yes, yes—you can leave your hat on.”

And so it did: a stripped-down panic in nothing but a hat, swaying awkwardly to Joe Cocker inside his skull. Nathan raised his glass to the trembling specter and said, “Well done, darling. You’re just anxiety now. Manageable. Portable. TSA-approved.”

He poured another, just to keep her that way.

Anxiety: *(now only in her birthday suit plus a hat)* Evening, Nathan.

Nathan: (stiffly) Good evening.

Anxiety: Is, uh… is your mind a goer, eh? Know whatahmean, know whatahmean, nudge nudge, say no more?

Nathan: I… I beg your pardon?

Anxiety: Your, uh, your mind—does she *go*, eh, does she go?

Nathan: (flustered) Well… she sometimes "goes," yes.

Anxiety: Aaaaaaah bet she does, bet she does, say no more, say no more, eh?

Nathan: (confused) I'm afraid I don't quite follow you.

Anxiety: Follow me! Follow me! That's good, that's good! A nod's as good as a wink to a blind bat!

Nathan: Are you, uh, selling something?

Anxiety: SELLING! Very good! Ay? Ay? Oooh! Ya wicked Ay! Wicked Ay! Oooh hooh! Say no more!

Nathan: Well, I, uh….

Anxiety: Is your uh… is your mind a sport, ay?

Nathan: Um, she likes sport, yes.

Anxiety: I bet she does!

Nathan: As a matter of fact she's very fond of rugby.

Anxiety: 'Oo isn't? Likes games, eh? Knew she would! Likes games, eh? Been around a bit, been around?

Nathan: She has traveled, yes. She's from Scarsdale. *(pause)*

Anxiety: SAY NO MORE! Scarsdale, saynomore saynomore saynomore!

Nathan: I wasn't going to.

Anxiety: Oh! Well, never mind. Dib dib? Is your uh… mind interested in… photography, ay? "Photographs," ay? He asked him knowingly.

Nathan: Photography?

Anxiety: Snap snap, grin grin, wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more?

Nathan: MRI, eh?

Anxiety: They could be, they could! Brain MRI scans! Brain, you know, Brain photography!

Nathan: No, no, I'm afraid we don't have an MRI.

Anxiety: Oh. *(leeringly)* Still, moooooh, ay? Mwoohohohohoo, ay? Hohohohohohoho, ay?

Nathan: Look… are you insinuating something?

Anxiety: Oh, no, no, no… yes.

Nathan: Well?

Anxiety: Well, you're a man of the world, Nathan.

Nathan: Yes…

Anxiety: I mean, you've been around a bit, you know, like, you've, uh… you've *done it*…

Nathan: What do you mean?

Anxiety: Well, I mean, like… you've SLEPT with someone with a *normal mind*…

Nathan: Yes…

Anxiety: *(leaning in, voice soft and terrified)* What's it like?

Pirandello and Cioran would've nodded in tired approval at Nathan's brain: not mad enough for asylum, not sane enough for comfort.
He wished he could go completely mad — cleanly, absolutely, gloriously mad — but, as usual, he only got close enough to *feel the pain of almost*. Close enough to smell the smoke, but never the peace of the fire.

You see, a true madman is a *freeman of the unreal.*
He shakes the scaffolding you've built to pretend you're all right. He lives in a carnival without tickets, reason having packed her bags and left with the cat.
He talks to shadows that talk back, makes love to hallucinations that keep their promises, and sleeps like a saint because even his nightmares are homegrown.

But Nathan — Nathan was cursed with clarity. He saw the absurdity and couldn't believe in it; he saw the reason and couldn't use it.
He lived in the *demilitarized zone* between awareness and collapse — a no-man's-land patrolled by anxiety in a hat and insomnia in lingerie.

His thoughts looped, each one a Möbius strip of "maybe I'm fine" and "maybe I'm doomed."
He envied the madman's simplicity — the

purity of drowning, without the self-consciousness of gasping.

For one aspect, Nathan matched Pirandello's description: you say, *"This cannot be";* but for Nathan, everything *can* be.
What flowers of logic he scattered! Wild orchids growing from the cracks of reason, blooming beautifully wrong.

But only the madman enjoys the privilege of passing smoothly from nocturnal to daylight existence — and that, Nathan could not afford. His passport to madness was forever pending approval.
His dreams were his waking terrors, his waking the fear of his dreams becoming true — from scratch, or worse, becoming true *again.*

He envied the mad, those elegant wrecks who had finally made peace with the storm.
They had *renounced reason as the beggar has renounced his belongings.*

Nathan tried too. He tried to strip himself of sense, like Saint Francis before his father: naked, defiant, pure in his surrender.

But the world would not allow it.
Every time he undressed his mind, someone came running — conscience, memory, bureaucracy, love — all of them throwing garments back on him: *a coat of fear, a shirt of duty, a tie of regret.*

And so he stood there, half-naked in the marketplace of sanity, clutching the last rags of identity while the town insisted he stay decent. He did not want decency. He wanted *relief.*

He did not want clothes. He wanted *lightness.*

He did not want to be Nathan. He wanted to be *no one.*

There are freedoms *of.*
There are freedoms *from.*
And then, there is the **Freedom of Nathan.**

Nathan's freedom consists in this declaration:

"The cat vomited on the floor, and I'm not cleaning it."

Simple. Direct. Blasphemous to the cult of self-care.

The chorus of pearl-clutchers rose at once — the self-appointed guardians of decency, mops in hand, eyes wide with hygienic horror.
"Are you out of your mind?" they gasped.
"That's disgusting!"
"How can you leave it there?"
"That's not freedom, that's *being a pig!*"
"Have some respect for yourself!"
"That's why you have mental problems — you don't *love yourself!*"

But the louder they preached, the freer he became.
Their outrage was oxygen. Their disgust, his liberation.

While they raged in chorus, Nathan simply leaned back, glass in hand, and looked at the pale puddle on the tiles as if it were *art*.

And then — God forgive him if He ever existed — he smiled.
The first real smile in weeks.
A small, weary, victorious smile that said:
You're all still cleaning floors. I've stopped pretending they matter.

Said the Supreme-adjacent Poet:
Days without meaning, like a sea without wind,
Like pearls from necklaces of sadness.
The gates of summer are wet with winter,
A dog runs away — like your youth.

He said it so well. But he said it almost sadly, melancholically — as if even the immortals had hangovers.

Nathan admired that verse like a condemned man admires the rope: beautiful craft, terrible

application. Because really, what's happier than having time that *flies away*? Time as a gull, flapping frantically, trying to escape us — only to cross quicker into *the undiscovered country,* from whose bourn no traveller returns, except in dreams and tax forms.

Still, Nathan wondered: why must it crawl? Regardless of the bends and ribbons of time — the relativistic ballet of light and gravity — *this* time, his time, this coffee-stained human time, moved in dreary linear motion. One damn minute after another.

Would it be so hard, he thought, for time to pick up the pace a bit?
To bend its lazy curve into something nonlinear — a little acceleration toward the inevitable? *Tempus fugit in fine velocior.*
Let time have the decency to sprint at the end.

That was Nathan's modest plea to the cosmos:
If I can't stop it, at least let it hurry the hell up.

Nathan was half-voice improv singing — the kind of muttering that starts as humming and ends as theology.

Out of the wall of life
I just picked me a plug,
Then got a fork,
And everything's startin' to hum.

Still, it's a real good bet
The fork is yet to buzz,
Fork is yet to buzz, and babe,
Plug it in — that would be fine.

He even gave it a little shoulder shimmy, like Sinatra in a mental ward lounge, backed by an orchestra of distant fridges and buzzing fluorescent lights.

The melody stumbled between E minor and electrocution.
He tapped the fork on the counter like a conductor's baton.

The wall socket, patient and unamused, stared back — two black eyes waiting for the encore.

Nathan paused, looked at his reflection in the window.
"Not yet," he said to it, to the fork, to the universe.
"Still need to find the right key."

And he poured another drink. The hum of the fridge applauded politely.

Nathan lived in a permanent musical—except the orchestra was an MRI machine and the chorus line wore hospital wristbands.

He called it *High Anxiety,* his private theme song, hummed under every thought like a leaky pipe in a motel ceiling.

Whenever she was near—*she*, that twitchy mistress of dread—his pulse went bebop.
High anxiety, the inner soundtrack crooned,
it's you that Nathan fears.

His heart, a cautious pilot, refused to take off; it had crashed before, left flaming debris across several decades.
But then she would take his hand—the same trembling, invisible hand that led him nowhere—and the whole system would flare again: blood pressure, memory, existential dread.
High anxiety, it's always the same.

He tried to blame her, of course. *Ooh-xiety,* he called her now, half mockery, half confession. She'd smile with that nervous energy of a cat on Red Bull.
It was very clear: she always won.

So Nathan, philosopher of the absurd and failed saint of self-medication, did what any rational man would do—he hoped for the best and expected the worst.
He took some pills, then died of thirst, which seemed about right. He lived in a world where

every treatment was its own symptom, and every symptom its own encore.

There was no way of knowing which way it was going—he'd stopped trying to steer long ago. Hope for the best, expect the worst: that was his creed, stitched into the lining of his hangover.

The world was a stage, all right, but Nathan had missed rehearsals, ignored the director, and kept forgetting his lines.
No one reached the top, friends—we all just drop, friends.

And yet—somehow—his heart still started to soar once more.
Against better judgment, against experience, against gravity.
A small, ridiculous thing, fluttering in his chest like a paper airplane in a hurricane.
It would crash again, inevitably.
But for now—it flew.